



Daniel Stewart, artistic director and maestro of the Santa Cruz Symphony. Credit: Jana Marcus

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

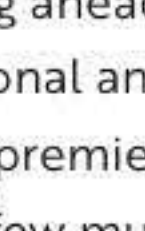
## How maestro Daniel Stewart is shaping Santa Cruz Symphony's 69th season



BY JANA MARCUS

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Quick Take

Santa Cruz Symphony Music Director Daniel Stewart is bringing together Dvořák and Nina Simone, Stravinsky and BTS, Rachmaninoff and virtual reality pioneer Jaron Lanier for the orchestra's 69th season, "Music Unites Us." Jana Marcus sat down with Stewart to find out how those unlikely musical pairings come together.

After a season that brought some of the [Santa Cruz Symphony's](#) most ambitious collaborations to the stage, including the [theatrical spectacle of "Amadeus,"](#) Music Director Daniel Stewart might reasonably be expected to take a breath.

Apparently, that isn't how his mind works.

With the symphony's 69th season about to begin, Stewart is already looking ahead, bringing together traditional and contemporary music, world premieres, iconic masterworks and a few musical pairings that, at first glance, might seem to have very little business happening in the same room.

So how does he put it all together? It seemed like a good time to sit down with the maestro and find out.

**What:** Santa Cruz Symphony presents its 69th season, beginning with "United Sounds of America"

**When:** **Saturday, Oct. 3** – Santa Cruz Civic Auditorium, 7:30 p.m.; **Sunday, Oct. 4** – Henry J. Mello Center, Watsonville, 2 p.m.; **Friday, Oct. 2** – Free open rehearsal at the Santa Cruz Civic Auditorium, 7:30 p.m. A behind-the-scenes look at how the symphony prepares for performance.

**Tickets:** [Click here](#) or call 831-420-5260

Titled "[Music Unites Us,](#)" the season moves freely across centuries, cultures and musical traditions, from Antonín Dvořák and Nina Simone to Igor Stravinsky and BTS, Sergei Rachmaninoff and [virtual reality pioneer Jaron Lanier.](#)

For Stewart, now entering his 11th season with the orchestra, those unlikely combinations are precisely the point.

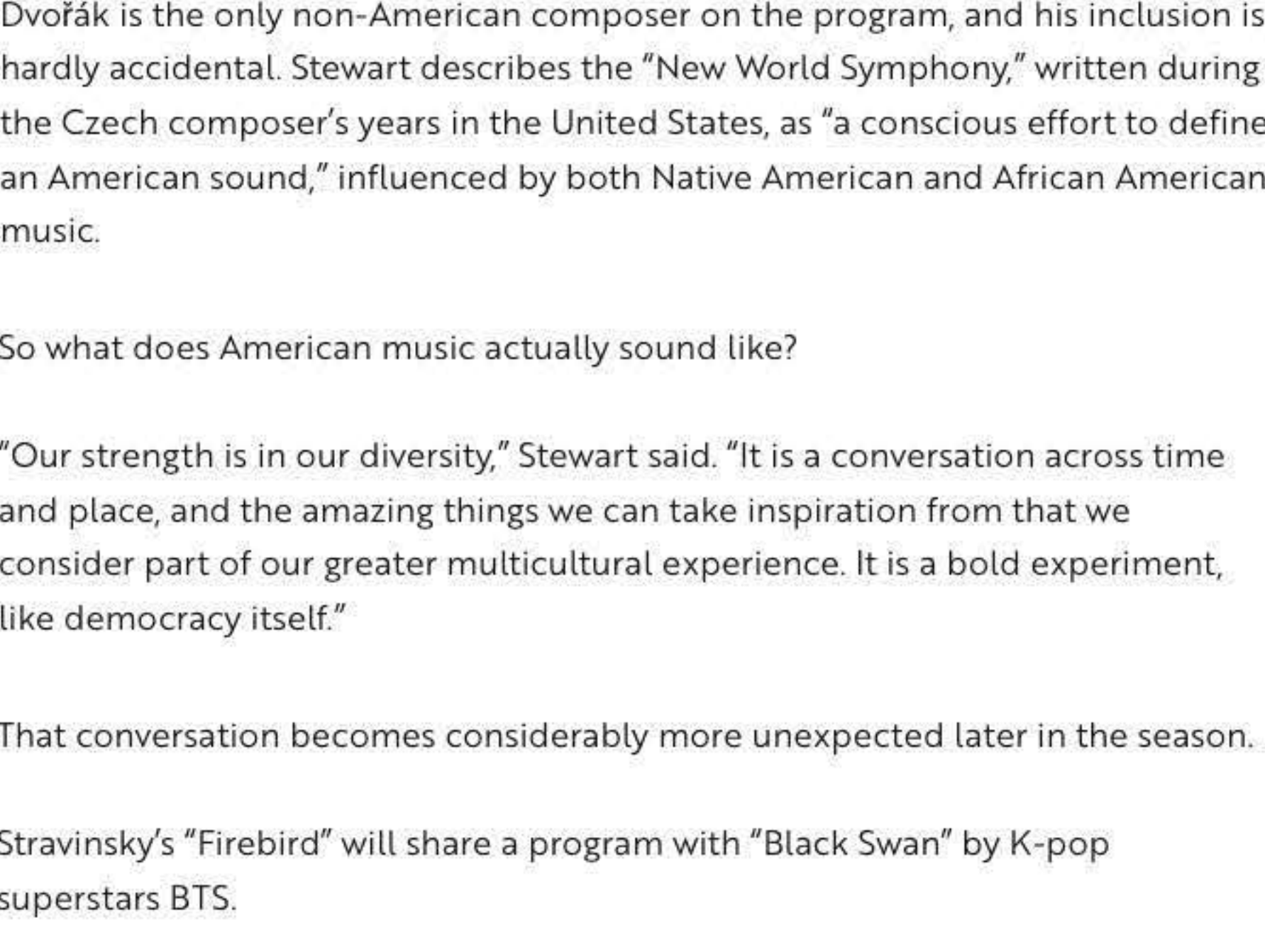
"You have to be in conversation with the past," Stewart said. But for an orchestra to have that conversation without including music being created now, he finds "unthinkable."

That conversation is the thread Stewart keeps returning to. He wants each concert to become what he calls "a full dialogue," with one piece of music answering another across time, style and cultural influence.

Spend any time talking with Stewart about music, and you begin to understand where some of those pairings come from. His mind rarely travels in a straight line. It moves associatively, jumping from history to sound to culture to a visual image, then back to music.

One connection sparks another, sometimes separated by a century. This idea is on full display from the opening concert.

"United Sounds of America," presented Oct. 3 at the Santa Cruz Civic Auditorium and Oct. 4 at the Mello Center in Watsonville, will take a musical journey through roughly 150 years of the American experience. Its definition of American music will cast a deliberately wide net.



Open rehearsal of "Amadeus," performed in March 2026. Daniel Stewart conducts the symphony as Will Block of Santa Cruz Shakespeare performs the role of Mozart. Credit: Jana Marcus

Dvořák's finale from the "New World Symphony" will sit alongside Charles Ives, George Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue," Florence Price's "Juba Dance," Samuel Barber's "Adagio for Strings," Aaron Copland's "Fanfare for the Common Man" and music from Leonard Bernstein's "West Side Story."

Then Nina Simone will enter the conversation.

Omari Tau will perform his own interpretation of Simone's "Come Ye," orchestrated for the occasion by Stewart. Former Santa Cruz Symphony French horn player Jackie Orzel's "Chukchansi Overture" will receive its world premiere, and the concert will end on a bright note with John Williams and music from "Star Wars."

There will even be a surprise encore Stewart refuses to reveal.

Dvořák is the only non-American composer on the program, and his inclusion is hardly accidental. Stewart describes the "New World Symphony," written during the Czech composer's years in the United States, as "a conscious effort to define an American sound," influenced by both Native American and African American music.

So what does American music actually sound like?

"Our strength is in our diversity," Stewart said. "It is a conversation across time and place, and the amazing things we can take inspiration from that we consider part of our greater multicultural experience. It is a bold experiment, like democracy itself."

That conversation becomes considerably more unexpected later in the season.

Stravinsky's "Firebird" will share a program with "Black Swan" by K-pop superstars BTS.

It sounds like a stunt until Stewart explains how it came to be.

"It started when I was conducting the San Francisco Symphony Youth Orchestra during COVID, and all that mindless Asian hate was spreading around," Stewart said. "The youth orchestra was around 90% Asian, so I was determined to find ways to support them in that moment."

He fell in love with the string arrangement in "Black Swan," created his own orchestral version, and performed it with the orchestra. A video of that performance has since drawn well over 10 million views across social media.

"It's been humbling to read some of the thousands of comments, in so many languages, and realize how deeply this music resonates with today's young people," said Stewart.

But bringing BTS into the concert hall isn't simply an attempt to attract younger listeners. Stewart hears a genuine musical relationship.

Stravinsky's Art Nouveau-inspired "Firebird" was groundbreaking in its time. BTS created its own fusion of music and dance for another generation. Stewart sees two highly expressive works tied to movement and transformation and, not incidentally, two very different birds.

Ask him about the pairing and his associative mind takes off. Within minutes, he moves among the Ballets Russes of the early 20th century, young musicians during COVID, anti-Asian hate, pop music, dance, mythical birds and the visual world surrounding the concert.

"It's both a playful pairing and a serious musical connection," Stewart said.

Then he is off again, this time to William Walton's Concerto for Viola, also on the program, whose atmosphere conjures for him something "very Art Nouveau into Art Deco – a kind of 'Great Gatsby'-era sensuality and energy to it."

And somehow, in Stewart's mind, they all end up in the same room.

The pattern repeats with another unlikely program: Rachmaninoff's Third Piano Concerto, performed by guest artist Serene, alongside the world premiere of Jaron Lanier's "Singularity Variations."

Serene herself embraces two worlds. She is both a touring concert pianist and computer scientist, and the inventor of Snowflake, anti-censorship software used by the Tor Project. Her experimental performances have also combined classical piano with technology.

Lanier is best known as a computer scientist, author and virtual-reality pioneer, but his musical life runs deep. He has collaborated with John Cage, Philip Glass and Lou Harrison, and grew up with classical music thanks to his mother, a Viennese concert pianist.

Suddenly, putting Lanier and Rachmaninoff on the same program doesn't seem quite so strange.

Stewart doesn't hear them as opposites anyway.

"Rachmaninoff is miscategorized as conservative music," he said. "The concert is a wink to his pioneerism of that time. He just used a musical language that was very communicative in an unforgettable way."

Then Stewart jumps to painting.

"You can see them in the same way as Picasso," he said. "He started his painting career very traditional, as did Jaron and Serene, but then went in new and experimental directions."

For listeners who approach contemporary music with some trepidation, Stewart has a request: "Listen to what it is, not what it isn't."

More discoveries await, including the world premiere of "Santa Cruz Overture" by young local composer Daniel Strebulaev, whom Stewart describes as a playful, melodic talent who "could be the next John Williams." Stewart will also conduct his wife, violinist In Sun Jang, in the Tchaikovsky Violin Concerto.



Daniel Stewart's artwork, for the second Santa Cruz Symphony concert of the season, depicts Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky and Felix Mendelssohn in conversation in a Santa Cruz setting.

After more than a decade leading the Santa Cruz Symphony, Stewart says the orchestra's growth has given him something he didn't expect. Not the ability to program bigger music, but the ability to program quieter music.

The orchestra tackled enormous challenges early in his tenure, from "The Rite of Spring" to full operas, requiems and "Carmina Burana." Now he feels increasingly able to create what he calls "more subtle, delicate overall constructions" and explore music he hasn't had enough seasons to get to, including Felix Mendelssohn's "Symphony No. 4."

"The amount of wonderful pieces to share is frustrating, in that there isn't enough time to bring them all to life," he said.

However, ask Stewart whether any particular piece frightens him, and he doesn't name one.

"With every piece of music, I work myself into a frenzy on how I can make it more vivid and effortless," he said.

There may also be more than one Daniel Stewart doing the worrying.

He is a conductor, but also a composer and violist. Asked whether those three musical identities ever disagree, he laughed. "All the time."

"If I think out the music with my conducting mind, my composer mind, my violist mind, these are all valid and visceral relationships," he said.



Daniel Stewart conducting the Santa Cruz Symphony. Credit: Jana Marcus

A gesture that seems perfect to the conductor may feel gratuitous to the instrumentalist. The composer may hear something else entirely.

"I'm always trying to find the invisible agreement among all of them," Stewart said.

Stewart carried that impulse beyond the music this year, creating the season's visual artwork using several AI programs, a decision that drew some criticism online. He spent weeks developing and refining the images, each designed around the musical world of a particular concert.

"I put all my heart and storytelling into the pieces, with subtle layers of meaning for each of the programs," Stewart said. "I wanted to imagine what it might be like for the composers to interact with one another in a Santa Cruz setting, to spark curiosity and open up another way of thinking about the musical pairings."

Which brings us back to where our conversation with Stewart began.

So how does he put it all together?

For Stewart, it isn't about making Dvořák and Nina Simone, Stravinsky and BTS, or Rachmaninoff and Jaron Lanier say the same thing. They don't.

It is about putting them in the same room and listening to what happens when one voice answers another. Across cultures. Across generations. Across centuries. Even across the three musical minds arguing inside the conductor himself.

For Stewart, unity doesn't mean everyone playing the same note. It means listening closely enough to find the invisible agreement.